Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 8
Issue 1 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 28

June 2004

A Profile of Afghanistan

Country Profile
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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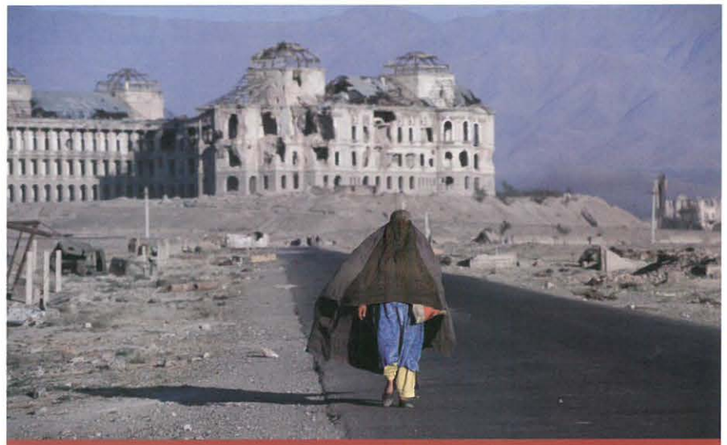
The Topography of a Broken Land

Afghanistan is a dry, landlocked nation made up mostly of rugged mountains that run northeast to southwest and divide the northern provinces from the rest of the country. Bordered by Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, it also shares a tiny strip of land with China. Because of its cold winters and hot summers, nearly all of Afghanistan's supply of natural fresh water begins as snow. This limited supply, however, has been severely depleted because of a four year drought from 1998–2002. Drought and the added thirst of two million returning refugees has left nearly 80 percent of Afghanistan's population without access to safe drinking water.[1] The drought has also affected Afghanistan's struggling farm and livestock (mostly sheep and goats) production. The country is highly dependent upon foreign aid to meet its most basic needs such as food and medical care.



I come to you and my heart finds rest.
Away from you, grief clings to my heart like a snake.
I forget the throne of Delhi
when I remember the mountain tops of my Afghan land.
If I must choose between the world and you,
I shall not hesitate to claim your barren deserts as my own.

-Ahmad Shah Durrani (Pashto Poet)

Bin Ladin and Taliban and Warlords, Oh My!

Following Soviet military withdrawal in 1989, local leaders fought in bloody civil battles over control of the nation. Civil unrest ended with the rise of the Taliban, a group of ethnic Pashtuns backed by Pakistan. In 1994, the Taliban took Kandahar, and they entered Kabul unopposed in September 1996. The Taliban, whose rule was oppressive and often brutal, eventually seized power over 95 percent of the nation. The September 11th terrorist attacks in 2001 prompted the United States and Allied forces to action in support of the opposition. Near the end of that year, major leaders from these Afghan opposition groups met in Bonn, Germany, and agreed on a plan for the formulation of a new government structure that resulted in the inauguration of Hamid Karzai as Chairman of the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA). The AIA held a nationwide Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) in June 2002, and Karzai was elected President.

Despite these developments, most of the people in Afghanistan continue to live in fear of oppression and violence. With only about 20,000 peacekeepers and Karzai's inability to control any part of the country outside of Kabul, Afghanistan has come under the power of warlords who siphon federal funds and participate in illegal opium trading to finance their own personal militias. Only a fraction of the duties and taxes collected by provincial leaders find their way to the central government. UN experts expect this year's crop to yield 3,600 tons of opium; that makes up three-fourths of the world's heroin. Also, some of the warlords are as brutal as their predecessors. The Kabul-based Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission has observed Afghan commanders eliciting forced marriages, making illegal land grabs in Kabul and performing several executions.

In addition to these problems, the Taliban continues to maintain a presence in areas of the south. Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, in hiding, is said to be controlling nearly a third of the country's territory. New offensives and more troops were deployed by the United States in the spring of 2004 in efforts to capture terrorist leader Osama Bin Laden and end Taliban control of the south. Years of conflict have left Karzai with the task of rebuilding demolished roadways and bridges and helping a large segment of the population gain basic resources such as continuous power and running water.

The Continuing Problem of Landmines

Afghanistan's greatest man-made environmental problem is, of course, landmines. Planted by Soviet troops, the Mujahedin and the Taliban, some estimate the number of landmines in Afghanistan to be around 40 million. The types of landmines found there make up a smorgasbord of varieties. Deminers have encountered over 50 types of AP (blast and fragmentation) mines and the AT mines of eight different countries. More than half of these varieties were of Russian/CIS origin. The most common AP mines found are PMN, PMN-2, POMZ, POMZ-2, Type 72 and OZM 3/72. The AT mines found are mostly Russian TM (46/57), TC-6 and Pakistani P2.

Most of these landmines are concentrated in the western, eastern and southern regions of the country. They are scattered indiscriminately through both urban and rural areas restricting commercial and agricultural growth. They also line many of the transport roads hindering safe and timely transportation throughout the country. Despite continuing efforts to clear land in Afghanistan, unstable security and limited resources have kept it on the top of the list of the world's most mine-infested countries. According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), "Landmines contaminate all but two of Afghanistan's provinces and are scattered over an area of more than 780 sq km, including towns and villages, grazing land and roads."[2] These landmines were responsible for 1,286 deaths in the year 2002 alone.

Recent and prior conflict has also left large amounts of UXO, which have killed another 154 people and left 1,132 injured in 2002.[3] Highly explosive bombs, cluster munitions and missiles were used in great numbers during military operations of coalition forces since October 2001. The additional UXO compounds the problem of landmines and further debilitates the population. Efforts to clear the land of both landmines and UXO have been frustrated by its rugged terrain and political instability.

Deminers and demining agencies in Afghanistan have faced some difficulty in clearing certain areas that lack adequate security. UN demining staff was forced to halt demining activities along parts of the road between Kabul and Kandahar after a series of attacks in the beginning of May 2003. After another attack, deminers in six southern provinces began traveling with local armed escorts to ensure safety. Finally, on May 22, the United Nations suspended all demining activity in 10 provinces of southern and southwestern Afghanistan, as well as along a road from Kabul to Jalalabad. Deminers were then redeployed to other regions. Attacks continued into June when a rocket was launched into a demining camp, failing to damage or hurt anyone. Nine deminers were injured in yet another attack, which prompted the United Nations to conduct a review of the security situation. In July 2003, UN operations were resumed in all provinces with added security measures in place.[2] In February 2004, violence against deminers struck once again when suspected Taliban gunmen killed four deminers working for the Organization for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR) in the western part of the country.

In response to this recent tragedy, Mine Action Center for Afghanistan (MACA) spokesperson Takuto Kubo writes: "We never send deminers to areas where factional fighting or military operations are going on, and also areas that [the United Nations] thinks high risks of security instability and possible security incidents. However, these attacks happen where deminers have been safely operating for a long time, so it is hard to predict and prevent (as was the case in most of terrorist attacks in anywhere in the world). It also means that local people in urgent need of mine and UXO clearance may not be able to receive our clearance and mine risk education due to our suspension of operations."[3]

Avoiding the Fate of Sisyphus

The United Nation's oldest mine action program is the Mine Action Program for Afghanistan (MAPA) (in operation since 1989). It, along with scores of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN affiliates, has been working diligently through war and peace to reduce the massive numbers of landmines in Afghanistan. Despite nearly 15 years of effort, however, Afghanistan continues to be one of the most mined nations in the world. Although the Taliban have been ousted from national power, lingering Taliban elements in the south and east continue to use landmines as booby traps against occupying forces. Last June, two U.S. soldiers were killed when their vehicle drove over a manually detonated mine in the city of Asadabat. Renewed conflict and bombing continue to increase the number of UXO. Like the mythic figure of Sisyphus, who was doomed to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain and watch it roll back down again, so have mine action workers in Afghanistan watched the size of their task grow with each new offensive.

Mine action in Afghanistan is not a Sisyphusian task, however, because perceptible progress has been made. In the past three years especially, with the relatively greater freedom of post-Taliban rule, mine action workers have accomplished much in terms of policy, clearance, awareness and victim assistance. According to the *Landmine Monitor*, funding for mine action has quadrupled since 2001, totaling approximately $64 million (U.S.). About $51.4 million of this was provided through UN MACA and about $12.9 million was provided through bilateral donations and in-kind contributions. Japan continues to be the leading donor of funds, giving a total of $21.2 million in 2002. The European Commission (EC) and the United States were second and third respectively in donations.

Stockpile Destruction

Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah signed the Mine Ban Treaty on July 29, 2002, which officially went into force last March. After the government acceded to the Treaty in September 2002, a few of the provincial authorities were willing to hand over stockpiled mines and explosive ordnance (EO). At that time, an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team from the Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC) went to these provinces and destroyed 400 AP mines, 500 mortars, 1,000 projectiles and 200 fuses. Currently, ATC has 12 EOD teams, each consisting of 14 men, working throughout the country. In their 14 years of operation, ATC has located and destroyed a total of 3,437 AT mines, 143,392 AP mines and 1,611,676 items of UXO. The ministry of defense plans to conduct a countrywide assessment to prepare an inventory list of the number, location and type of mine caches before creating a comprehensive plan for stockpile destruction.

Survey and Assessment

Survey and Assessment has been problematic in recent years due to an explosion of economic regrowth in urban sectors. This has caused an increase in the need for

clearance activities in reconstruction projects. According to Takuto Kubo, Surveyors must now try to balance humanitarian needs with the needs of development. Prioritizations of mine action activities have made a perceptible shift towards reconstruction and development due to post-conflict security issues in 2002 and 2003. The Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA), with oversight and monitoring by the Survey Action Center (SAC), started a new 14-month survey in June 2003. The following are some tentative survey and destroyed devices figures for 2003.

Clearance

According to the Landmine Monitor, about 263 sq km of mined land has been cleared in addition to 422 sq km of battlefield areas from 1989–2002. In that time, over 268,000 AP mines, nearly 13,000 AT mines and over 2,488,000 items of UXO were detected and destroyed. Below are tentative figures for the year 2003.

Through February 2004, ATC had cleared 82.4 sq km of high-priority mined areas and 192.7 sq km of former battlefields. It is currently working to clear battle and minefield areas in and around the Kabul International Airport, the Kabul-Jalalabad Highway and nearby secondary roads that could serve as alternate routes to the highway. ATC is also working on a few clearance side projects on provincial roads (funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development) and at the Sardeh Dam in Ghazni province. The organization currently has 25 manual minefield and battle area clearance teams of 40 men each (including operations and support staff), and 10 mechanical clearance units using excavators, backhoe loaders or rotary cutters. As the first organization to implement a Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration of Ex-combatants (DDR) Program in the northern Kundoz province, ATC has succeeded in facilitating the absorption of 110 ex-combatants into a clearance, mine risk education (MRE) and permanent marking program. Last February, ATC started a new DDR program in Parwan province (north of Kabul) with 49 enrollments.

The main agencies working on clearance, in addition to ATC, are the Agency for Rehabilitation & Energy Conservation (AREA), the Danish Demining Group (DDG), the Demining Agency for Afghanistan (DAFA), the HALO Trust, the Mine Detection and Dog Center (MDC), OMAR, MCPA, the Monitoring, Evaluation and Training Agency (META) and RONCO Consulting Corporation under contract to U.S. Department of State. AREA is an Afghan NGO established in 1993 devoted to community mine clearance. DDG is an international NGO working in various regions. DAFA clears battlefields and mined areas mainly in southern and western regions of the country. The HALO Trust began demining in Afghanistan in 1988 and clears multiple types of areas, mainly in the central and northern regions. The MDC has been training mine detection dogs (MDDs) and handlers since 1989. OMAR conducts both mine awareness and clearance activities. The MCPA primarily conducts surveys of mine- and battlefields. META is responsible for training and the monitoring and evaluation of mine action operations. RONCO Consulting Corporation is a U.S. commercial mine clearance contractor working with 13 Jordanian engineers to demine areas in Bagram and Kandahar.

Pakistan recently announced the planned start of the Torkhum-Jalalabad highway construction project in May 2004. With an estimated cost of $20 million, the road is due to be completed by June 2005. With surveying already done, deminers are currently working to clear the area for construction.

Mine Risk Education (MRE) and Victim Assistance

MRE in Afghanistan has three focus groups: returning refugees, children, and aid workers and journalists. The programs utilizes such approaches as MRE briefings at schools, informal education for women and girls, sessions held in mosques, community centers or clinics, and mass media campaigns. The *Landmine Monitor* states that at least 12 NGOs have been providing MRE to civilians and refugees in high-risk areas. These organizations are OMAR, AREA, HALO Trust, the Association for Aid and Relief, Japan (AAR), Ansar Relief Institute (ARI), Save the Children—USA, the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS), Handicap International Belgium (HIB), MCPA, the BBC Afghan Education Project, DAFA, META, and the Afghan Campaign to Ban Landmines (ACBL).

Conclusion

Afghanistan has a long history as one of the world's great centers of culture and art. It produced such cultural icons as famed Central Asian poet Rahman Baba and the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism. Once the seat of the great Mogul empire, it boasted some of the richest archeological artifacts in the world (most of which are now either looted or destroyed). Afghanistan's indomitably rich traditional culture, however, remains intact despite decades of warfare that have destroyed most of its tangible artifacts and relics.

The beauty and depth of Afghanis and their land persist despite the ravages of war, famine and economic instability. Their ability to endure is a trait that seems to have passed on to the mine action workers from around the world who have been vigilantly working for over a decade to clear the land of mines. As the poet Durrani elicits, it is not the barrenness of Afghanistan's deserts that draw him, but the oneness he claims with them. The sense of home that Durrani describes in his poem remains in the hearts of Afghans today, fueling their tenacious affection for what we perceive to be mere desert. For this reason, millions of Afghan refugees have returned and continue to return to their still-dangerous homeland. Their determination to reclaim this broken land motivates the world to strive with them.

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* *Photo c/o AP.*

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